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ABSTRACT

Perceptions of interpersonal communication skills of participants in the Women in Community Service (WICS) program, an initiative of Tennessee JOBS, were assessed to examine the relationship between WICS skill blocks training and improvement in communication competence and communicator style flexibility while decreasing communication apprehension. Participants from three WICS classes completed surveys both pre- and post-program training to test one research question and three hypotheses. Besides a programmatic evaluation of this and other work readiness initiatives in their ability to improve the communication ability of program participants, the research project also compared the participants' perceptions to those of a group of entry level college students. Null and mixed findings suggest that more emphasis be placed on communication skill training in work readiness programs. Further, findings imply that participation in work readiness programs may make participants aware of communication inadequacies and serve to lower rather than increase self-perceptions about communication skill. (Contains 3 tables of data and 46 references.) (Author)

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Assessing Interpersonal Communication Skills in Preparing Women for Work

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Assessing Interpersonal Communication Skills

in Preparing Women for Work

Abstract: Perceptions of interpersonal communication skills of participants in the Women in Community Service (WICS) program, an initiative of Tennessee JOBS, were assessed to examine the relationship between WICS skill blocks training and improvement in communication competence and communicator style flexibility while decreasing communication apprehension. Participants completed surveys both pre- and post-program training to test one research question and three hypotheses. Besides a programmatic evaluation of this and other work readiness initiatives in their ability to improve the communication ability of program participants, the research project also compares the participants' perceptions to those of a group of entry level college students. Null and mixed findings suggest that more emphasis be placed on communication skill training in work readiness programs. Further, the findings imply that participation in work readiness programs may make participants aware of communication inadequacies and serve to lower rather than increase self-perceptions about communication skill.

There have been a number of programs proposed to put unemployed women on welfare back to work. All of them are aimed at trying to give unemployable women the skills they will need in work situations. Most participants have never worked and have little awareness of communication complexity required for many entry-level jobs. Women participating in these programs receive some type of federal assistance; most have had few opportunities to realize the goal of self-support. As such, the programs are designed to help these women decrease their reliance on welfare or AFDC. Women in Community Service (WICS) is one of many programs designed to aid women in this transition from welfare to work.

Currently Congress has three main goals: to limit federal spending, hand welfare programs back to the states, and put welfare recipients to work (Katz, 1995a). To improve their impact, programs must motivate recipients and funds must be committed to training because without training most recipients will not have the skills to succeed in the workforce.

This focus on moving recipients from welfare-to-work is in line with recent social welfare policy related specifically to the AFDC program. Since its inception in 1935, the AFDC program has seen dramatic increase in federal and state costs; a shift in caretaker characteristics from primarily widows to mothers who are separated, divorced, or never married; and a marked increased in the proportion of mothers in the general population with children younger than 18 (Vosler & Ozawa, 1992). Welfare support

programs are faced with two questions: 1) should mothers who are the heads of households stay at home to raise their children, 2) or should they become economically self sufficient through employment?

The Family Support Act of the JOBS[1] program requires states to ensure that targeted groups of welfare recipients participate in training and move into paid work. (Vosler & Ozawa, 1992). The JOBS programs does not cover all AFDC recipients; it only targets certain populations including long term AFDC recipients and young parents who do not have a high school education. Effective implementation of the JOBS program fundamentally depends on the availability and organization of education and training programs, support services, and opportunities for employment paying adequate wages. In many programs, staff and participants have found that the availability of needed educational support programs and services, as well as opportunities for stable employment providing a decent standard of living for the mother and her family, to be critical components for helping AFDC mothers, many of whom want to become economically self sufficient.

Women in Community Service

To that end, the primary focus of our study, Women in Community Service or WICS is trying to do just that. WICS, a nonprofit organization, headquartered in Alexandria, VA, was created by a coalition of five major national women's groups: the American G.I. Forum Women, Church Women United, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of Catholic Women, and National Council of Negro Women. This coalition is dedicated to helping women and young adults who are at-risk overcome multiple barriers, enter the work force, and achieve economic independence through a Lifeskills program. The Memphis Lifeskills Program, the focus of this study, is supported through a partnership between WICS, the city of Memphis Division of Housing and Community Development, and the Tennessee Department of Human Services JOBSWORK program. The program is divided into four main sections/elements: job skills evaluation, Lifeskills training, volunteer internship, and mentorship.

Although communication was not overlooked in the WICS program content, it was not an emphasized element in the program. This is unfortunate as effective communication skills are critical to the success of participants in three ways. First, participants must be able to articulate their job goals to program facilitators. WICS, like most other welfare-to-work programs, uses skill-based diagnostic testing

as well as interviews to ascertain participants' goals and deficiencies. Considerable effort is spent on these efforts as it is important to ascertain what the participant would like to accomplish. Unrealistic alignment of job training and job preferences will not succeed in moving these women from welfare to work. Second, participants must learn to effectively present themselves to others in public and professional settings. Job seekers need a minimum degree of communication competence and lack of communication apprehension to present themselves effectively to employment interviewers. Third, upon workplace entry, participants must demonstrate satisfactory communication flexibility to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of communicating with others in the workplace. Unfortunately, most welfare-to-work programs favor a job or task focus rather than a focus on the communication skills that support work relationships.

Objectives of the Study

The authors approached WICS to assess the communication foundation of their program, particularly their Lifeskills training component as we saw this as a fundamental cornerstone. We have uncovered no other study which examines general skills training or communication elements within general skills training in welfare-to-work programs. We chose to examine the broad areas of communication apprehension and communication competence as both represent a sizable literature providing numerable comparisons. We chose communicator style flexibility believing it would be an important indicator in a participant's ability to adapt to new communication situations quickly thereby making entry into the workplace easy.

The overall project comprised eleven months as the authors collected data both pre- and post-training with several training classes at WICS' Memphis location. Wanting to make comparisons with similar training programs, we also collected pre- and post-training data with Nashville WICS participants. Further comparisons became available as we collected data with two other welfare-to-work programs: The Urban League Computer Training Center and Fresh Start. We also went back to the Memphis and Nashville WICS rosters and collected post-training data from all of the previous training classes. The Memphis regional area was a prime target for our investigation of women's welfare-to-work program given that "Memphis/Shelby County ranks first in this country's 75 largest metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs)

in female-headed households . . . currently the Memphis MSA has about 28,000 families receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children, out of 96,000 in the state." (Surviving The, 1996, p. 10). Because graduates of these programs compete not only with one another but also with other job-seeking populations, a final comparison was sought by collecting data from college students enrolled in an introductory communication course at the beginning and end of the semester. This design allowed multiple comparisons not only of how welfare-to-work training groups have done in their respective settings, but also if the WICS program is providing skills comparable to those entering college–the individuals WICS participants will likely have to compete against for jobs.

Interpersonal Communication in Professional Settings

Kreps (1990) argues that interpersonal communication is extremely important in organizational contexts "because it is at this level that relationships are established" (p. 149). The inability of an employee to establish satisfactory communication relationships at work is likely to result at a minimum in job dissatisfaction, and, at a maximum, job desertion or termination. Kreps (1990) explains that the same relational expectancies we have for personal relationships are also sought in professional relationships. "As workload changes, relational expectations must be updated and revised through interpersonal communication" (Kreps, 1990, p. 151). More importantly, Pace and Faules (1994) note that "our closest friends in an organization, on the job . . . tend to care for us more than others. It is with them that we have our most satisfying interpersonal relationships" (p. 138). Communicating effectively with others at work to develop close relationships would appear to be an attractive objective for women who have limited job experience and/or limited external networks. Close interpersonal relationships at work may help them in developing improved self-identities and self-esteem which in turn result in longer job tenure. "Clearly interpersonal relationships exert a powerful and pervasive influence over organizational affairs" (Pace & Faules, 1994, p. 139). While the pervasive influence of relational communication job satisfaction has been debated (Conrad, 1994), most of us develop some relational ties in the workplace. For this particular population, effective communication leading to satisfying relationships may encourage job stability.

Not only would relationship development and relationship maintenance be important at the dyadic (e.g., superior-subordinate; colleague-colleague) levels, in work settings it is also likely that employees

must communicate with other employees in group settings. Employees frequently work in groups and attend meetings. As Kreps (1990) notes, such interactions are the "primary sites for accomplishing many of the major activities of modern organizations" (Kreps, 1990, p. 169). Adler and Towne (1990) define competence in communicating as "the ability to get what you are seeking from others in a manner that maintains the relationship on terms that are acceptable to both you and the other person" (p. 28). Such skill would be needed in groups as organizations move more quickly toward greater complexity. The more participative the organizational culture, the more likely all employees would be expected to add their viewpoint to discussions about group and organizational tasks. Spitzberg (1992) argues that competent communication occurs when communicators act effectively to achieve their outcomes, and appropriately as to not violate rules or the expectations of others. He further postulates that "the more all members of a group are competent at managing both functions, the more competently the group will develop, mature, and produce" (p. 425). Likewise, communication apprehension will affect employees' ability to develop work-related relationships in group settings. McCroskey and Richmond (1992) posit that "in no communication situation is communication apprehension more important than in the small group context . . . [it] may be the single most important factor in predicting communication in a small group" (p. 368).

Whether in dyads or in groups, interpersonal communication is effective when close contact occurs without developing hostility, information can be passed without confusion or misunderstanding, and problem solving can be initiated without provoking defensiveness (Pace & Boren, 1973). With respect to organizational goals of manufacturing products or providing service, the ability of employees to effectively communicate would seem paramount in organizations mounting cross-functional work designs or organizations seeking to emphasize the importance of internal and external customers. Eisenberg and Goodall (1993) summarize the necessary workplace skills from a report from the U. S. Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. They note that the interpersonal skills identified in the report--"working on teams, teaching, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds" (p. 327)--emphasizes why employers and employees should be concerned about communication effectiveness. As such, Harville (1992) comments that "communication skills are highly valued in American culture, partly because the majority of high-status jobs require

effective communication skills" (p. 150). Recently, a national survey, employers ranked oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, and teamwork skills first, second and third in what they seek in job candidates. These communication skills ranked above analytical skills, written communication skills, proficiency in field, and computer skills (What Employers, 1996).

Thus, the ability to approach others in communication exchanges at work would require a minimum of communication apprehension. The ability to communicate effectively without provoking others would require communication competence. The ability to move seamlessly throughout the varied communication transactions that occur in a workday would require communication flexibility. Each of these constructs have been identified as interpersonal constructs which have sufficient validity and reliability, a track record in communication research, and/or potential promise for future research (Rubin & Graham, 1994).

Communication Competence

Communication competence is most often defined as an internal measure having both cognitive and behavioral components (Duran & Wheeless, 1980) as well as a affective component (McCroskey, 1977). Communication competence can also be an impression formed about the appropriateness of another's communicative behavior (Duran & Wheeless, 1980). While communication skill is the ability to perform appropriately in particular situations, communication competence is the ability to demonstrate knowledge of situationally appropriate behaviors. Expanding on this, Spitzberg (1983a) and Rubin (1983) indicate that competence must be equated with a broader set of concerns such as communicative motivation, knowledge, and skills as they relate to effective communication. The competent communicator must possess sufficient levels of communication knowledge, have the ability to display the knowledge in ongoing interaction situations, and be motivated to do so (Spano & Zimmermann, 1995) as well as the flexibility to adapt to the particular situation. Perhaps more importantly, a person who is motivated to communicate, knowledgeable in communication, and sensitive to the context, is more likely to be viewed as competent to achieve desired objectives (Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987).

Communication competence is important because social interaction and interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in day-to-day interaction. As Spitzberg and Hurt (1987) assert, it is

"axiomatic that interpersonal communication competence is crucial to academic, personal, and social success" (p. 28). It would follow that the more competent an individual evaluates herself, the more likely she will communicate with others in a confident manner. However, a review of the available evidence has indicated that social inadequacy ranges from 7 to 49% of the student and adult populations (Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987).

Not surprisingly, Spitzberg & Hurt (1987) report that "calls for the inclusion of 'social' and communication skills in the standard educational curriculum have been made for decades" (p. 28). Such attention to communication competence by communication scholars and instructors deepens our concern with the WICS training. While some instruction or training seeks to directly improve communication skills, this goal is ancillary to the goals of welfare-to-work programs although the accomplishment of such a goal may be the foundation for successful job entry. Moreover, WICS participants will be competing with those individuals who are better trained and who have chosen to continue training or education in traditional academic avenues with greater opportunity to develop competent communication behaviors.

Communicator Style

Communicator style is broadly conceived to mean "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered or understood" (Norton, 1978, p. 99). More simply stated, a person's communicator style is the individual's way of communicating (Norton, 1983). One's communication style is observable, multifaceted, and is contingent upon time (hour of day, age of person), situation (actual people present and their purposes) and context (setting, purpose, and external and internal influences) (Norton, 1978).

> Style messages are signals about how to process content. Style adds to the color, tone, rhythm, and distinct "signature" of one's communication. Style, as such, gives direction, form, or guidance regarding how content should be understood. In effect, it is a message about content--a message about a message. (Norton & Brenders, 1996, p 75)

Communicator style is operationally defined by Norton (1983) as consisting of nine independent variables (dominant, dramatic, animated, impression-leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, friendly, and argumentative/contentious) and one dependent variable (communicator image). Other conceptualizations

include precise as an independent variable (Bednar, 1981; Montgomery & Norton, 1981). Norton contends that not only what is said but how it is said must be dealt with to arrive at a holistic, complex interpersonal communication theory of communication and its consequences.

The style element, or the way content is communicated, is inextricably part of any message. Therefore, flexibility of style is important to insure that content of any message is correctly sent and interpreted. Traditionally, communication flexibility has been treated as one particular dimension of interpersonal communication competence not as a dimension of communicator style. Specifically, it has been thought to involve the ability to create and adapt communication message behaviors and strategies to interaction situations (Spano, 1992). Pearce and Cronen's (1980) systems based approach to competence reflects the flexibility dimension of competence. "The optimally competent communicator . . . recognizes situational constraints and is able to function effectively within or outside of a given social system depending on individual choice" (Spano & Zimmermann, 1995, p. 19). The notion of adaptation, change, and creativity is inherent in the definition of Spano and Zimmermann's optimally competent communicator although our approach to communicator flexibility is somewhat different.

Several researchers have examined the style construct in organizational settings. McGrath and Downs (1990) examined the relationship among communicator style and management style. The purpose of the study was to examine which dimensions of communicator style were the best predictors of effective and ineffective management styles. They found among 280 undergraduate and graduate students that positive communication dimensions were more strongly related to effective management styles then ineffective ones. Bednar (1983) found that communicator style was associated with external assessment of effective managerial performance in two organizations. While we are unsure of the generalizability of communicator style flexibility in management positions to the organizational positions participants in welfare-to-work programs are likely to seek upon completion, these findings still emphasize the following: those who are have higher communication competence and less apprehension would be perceived as having a communicator style that is "employer friendly." This is further supported by Rubin (1985) who found that poorer performing managers reported that they had more difficulty in making themselves understood easily.

Norton and Brenders (1996) contend that individuals who believe they have little personal control in their lives defensively engage the world. Moreover, what the person expects affects what the person does and what the person does affects the reality that shapes future expectations in the interpersonal communication realm. Such fixation would limit the style flexibility necessary to respond to the variety of interactants and interaction situations. In the case of women in welfare-to-work programs, negative perceptions of the world could cause an individual to become fixed in a contentious/argumentative communicator style. While such style fixation may appear to distance the individual from external problems, this type of self-fulfilling prophecy can inhibit an individual's ability to enter the workplace. This is not uncommon; Norton & Brenders (1996) note that persons often persist in unsatisfactory courses of actions because they assume that change is impossible. This places particular importance in helping women in welfare-to-work programs become more communication competent, and become less communication apprehensive. Such efforts are likely needed first before one can successfully increase one's communicator style. We are not advocating that a particular style profile has been determined and should be taught. Rather, we are interested in examining the ability of individuals to increase the number of styles with which they feel comfortable and the ability to move among styles. Such a skill would facilitate one's ability to become situationally competent allowing them to react appropriately and effectively in communication activities in the workplace.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension is defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (Richmond & McCroskey, 1985). It has been observed that some people are more apprehensive orally than are other people and that this apprehension has a negative impact on their communication behavior as well as other aspects of their lives (McCroskey 1977). This does not mean someone will never communicate with another individual; however, it does mean they will communicate less (Daly & McCroskey, 1975).

Communication apprehension can be divided into two categories: trait apprehension and state apprehension. Trait apprehension is characterized by fear or anxiety across many different types of oral communication encounters, from one-on-one conversation to small groups to giving speeches before

large crowds. This type of apprehension occurs regardless of the context and is referred to as personality-type communication apprehension (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Spielberger defines state apprehension as "anxiety experienced in a particular situation at a particular time and may be regarded as an actual reaction to a stimulus" (cited in Beatty & Andriate, 1985, p. 175).

Communication apprehension has been examined in several contexts which relate to this study. Scott and Wheeless (1977) assessed oral, receiver, and writing communication apprehension. They found that oral and receiver communication apprehension had significant negative effects on student achievement. Later, McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, and Payne (1989) found that college students with higher levels of communication apprehension were more likely to drop out of college and attain lower grade point averages than students with low apprehension. Penley, Alexander, Jernigan, and Henwood (1991) demonstrated that managers who avoid the inherent communication requirements of their jobs perform less well. While the generalizability of these findings to other types of educational programs and other levels of organizational employees is not certain, these findings provide support for the position that communication apprehension would inhibit a person's ability or flexibility in their ability to adapt their communicator style to their work environment.

Research has focused on the relationship between perceived social style and communication apprehension. Two central components of social style perceptions are assertiveness and responsiveness. Traditionally, it has been regarded that people with high communication apprehension are perceived as low in both assertiveness and responsiveness which translates into a cool, independent, uncommunicative, and hard to know style. On the other hand, people with low communication apprehension were perceived high in both assertiveness and responsiveness translating into a warm, friendly, relationship oriented, and easy to know style.

McCroskey, Daly, Richmond, and Cox (1975) found that people with high communication apprehension are perceived as less socially attractive, less task oriented, less competent, less outgoing, and less sexually attractive. McCroskey, Daly, and Sorensen (1976) also found that communication apprehension is positively related with general anxiety and negatively correlated with tolerance for ambiguity, self control, taking chances, urgency, and emotional maturity. The limited exposure to

workplace situations of the population of interest is likely to have increased their communication apprehension. This would inhibit communication competence and thereby negatively influence their successful entry to the workforce.

Communication Skill Summary

What can we do to help move these women from apprehension to competence? The answers are unclear because this population has been largely ignored by researchers. More frequently, our studies focus on college students or adults who have already achieved some level of success in the workforce. Thus, this study seeks to provide a foundation from which training issues can be assessed by examining women's self-perceptons of their interpersonal communication skills. It seems reasonable that by increasing communication competence and decreasing communication apprehension, communicator style flexibility will increase. This, hopefully, would result in an increase in self confidence helping this population enter the workforce.

Hypotheses/Research Questions

Research Question 1 asks to what extent do the communication competence and communication apprehension scores for this population reflect normative data? We believe this is a critical question. Upon initial reflection, we might expect this population to report lower competence scores and higher apprehension scores. However, if participants in welfare-to-work programs perceive themselves to be similar in communication competence and apprehension to other populations, apprehension reduction techniques used at the college level, for example, could be transported to this learning environment.

Hypothesis 1 expects that the communication competence and communication apprehension scores of all participants--welfare-to-work program participants and the comparison college student group--will improve significantly over the testing period. Competence should increase; apprehension should decrease. Although each mode of instruction had varying amounts of attention to communication principles and/or communication skills and programs were of varying length, each learning program would purport such improvement as one of its objectives.

If there is an inverse relationship between participants communication competence and communication apprehension and this relationship strengthens over the course of the training, participants' communicator style flexibility should also increase as participants are able to express themselves and communicate with others in a greater variety of styles. Thus, **Hypothesis 2** predicts an increase in communicator style flexibility over the course of the training. Although communicator style flexibility as conceptualized in this study is untested, **Hypothesis 3** predicts that communicator style flexibility is predicted by the presence of competence and the absence of apprehension.

Methodology/Approach

Participants

The subject pool consisted of participants from the following welfare-to-work programs and comparison groups. WICS (Women in Community Service) is a ten week program in which participants participate in a series of assessments to determine what areas in the workplace that they would be most successful. Most participants do not have their high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma (GED). There are ten Lifeskills training blocks (including one communication skills block and one assertiveness skills block) and a component called Survival Skills. Women completing the full ten weeks are encouraged to enroll in GED programs, and then be subsequently placed in a secondary training program (either trade training or community college) by the Private Industry Council.

Unfortunately, tracking of individual participants was extremely difficult as mortality rates for program participation were high and individuals were allowed to join the program after classes were in session. Three Memphis WICS classes completed both pre- and post-training evaluations. From the first class, 10 participated in the pre-training evaluation; 15 participated in the post-training evaluation. The average age was 26.000 and 27.928, respectively; ages ranged from 19 to 39 and 19 to 44, respectively. From the second class, 10 participated in the pre-training evaluation; 6 participated in the post-training evaluation. The average ages were 25.500 and 22.260, respectively; ages ranged from 19 to 35 and 18 to 38, respectively. From the third class, 20 participated in both pre-trainnig and post-training evaluations. The average age for this group was 25.000; ages ranged from 18 to 38. Data collection for these three

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classes was done on-site during class time. All participants were female; all had at least one dependent child.

Twelve graduates of the Memphis WICS classes also returned self-evaluations post-training by mail. Average age for this group was 34.500; ages ranged from 20 to 61. This was the most difficult group to monitor as the program experienced heavy mortality in its early phase. The WICS program was part of an inner city housing/urban renewal project. Women frequently moved or lost access to utilities as funds were depleted. As an example of the difficulty in contacting this group, of the more than 50 members of the previous classes, just more than half of the questionnaires were successfully delivered by U.S. mail. The other half were returned to the researcher without forwarding addresses. Of the 12 completed and returned questionnaires, all but one indicated we could contact them by phone. Over the period of two weeks, three assistants attempted to make telephone contact but succeeded in talking with only one.

For the Nashville WICS classes, the program was housed in the welfare office where participants had to come to complete paperwork and collect benefits. Thus, the program administrators had more frequent contact with current and graduated students. Two attempts were made to collect data from the Nashville participants. First, one class of 11 participants provided data at both pre- and post-training. Average age for this group was 24.545; ages ranged from 18 to 39. Graduates of all previous Nashville WICS classes were mailed post-training evaluations. Eighteen of 120 mailed evaluations were completed and returned. Average age for this group was 34.000; ages ranged from 20 to 50. All Nashville WICS participants were female; all had at least one dependent child..

Fresh Start is a four week assessment program administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services. The program consists of assessing participants' skills and where they would best fit into the work place. There is also two weeks of Survival Skills training (which includes a communication block) and two weeks of mock job interviews, speakers, and site visits to potential employers. Upon graduation, participants are either sent to obtain their GED or onto secondary training through a program administered by the Private Industry Council (either trade or community college). Only post-training evaluations were collected from participants in the Fresh Start program. Eleven females reported their average age as 29.364; ages ranged from 20 to 47. Data was collected on site during class time.

Urban League Computer Training Center is a secondary training program administered by the Private Industry Council. Participants come here to improve or enhance their computer skills, interviewing skills, and communication skills. At the completion of their training, the participants are usually placed into employment. Data were collected on site during class time at the end of the training program. Eleven participants completed the self-evaluations; 10 were female; 1 was male. Average age for this group was 34.000; ages ranged from 20 to 50.

A comparison group of traditional age college students taking an introductory (but non-skills based) communication course at The University of Memphis also participated in the project. At the beginning of the course, 108 college students participated in data collection; 46 were female; 61 were male; one did not report gender. Because of the nature of this comparison group it was assumed that all of these individuals had completed high school or the general equivalency degree. Average age for this group of participants was 22.657; ages ranged from 17 to 44. Data were collected during class time.

Measures

Because of the need to reach participants in person and by mail, one questionnaire collapsed the 36 items on the Communication Competence Scale (CCS) (Weimann, 1977), the 24 items of the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (McCroskey, 1977), and the 50 items of the Foundation of a Communicator Style Construct (Norton, 1978). The questionnaire was designed in self-report fashion allowing the individuals to rate their perceptions of their communication competence, apprehension, and communicator style on five-point Likert-type scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree).

Communication Competence Survey (CCS).

Weimann created the Communication Competence Survey to measure communication competence, an ability to choose among available communication behaviors to accomplish one's own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face of fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Originally, 57 likert type items were used to assess five dimensions of interpersonal competence. This was reduced to the present 36 item self report instrument by using the items that best discriminated between competence conditions. The instrument has been widely used and has been reported as being internally reliable; several studies have

attested to its construct and concurrent validity (Rubin, Palmgreen, & Sypher, 1994). Unfortunately, the measure is reported as being used only with college students. To avoid factor structure problems as reported in Perotti and DeWine (1987), the instrument was used as a composite measure.

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA).

For purposes of this study, trait communication apprehension was included due to the limitations of collecting self-report data. Trait communication apprehension has been consistently viewed in the past as a cognitively experienced phenomenon (McCroskey, 1977). The most often used instrument to measure trait communication apprehension is the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension 24 (CA) (McCroskey, 1977) which is a self reporting instrument of 24 items. This instrument has seen extensive use since it was introduced by McCroskey, and has consistently yielded reliability estimates above .90. A summary of the research instrument through 1975 has provided a comprehensive argument in support of its validity in measuring oral trait communication apprehension (McCroskey, 1975).

Communication Style Measure (CSM).

The ten variables, nine independent and one dependent, which make up one's communicator style are measured in The Norton Communication Style Measure (CSM) (Norton, 1978). This 50 item survey is the most widely used and best researched instrument to measure one's communicator style. The independent variables include dominant, dramatic, animated, impression-leaving, relaxed, attentive, open, friendly, and argumentative/ contentious; the dependent variable is communicator image. A revised version of the CSM measure was used in this study. The nine original independent variables and a tenth--precise--made up the instrument to describe one's style.

As noted in Rubin, Palmgreen and Sypher (1994), there are relatively few measures of communication style. The others listed (Bem Sex Role Inventory, Role Category Questionnaire, Self-Monitoring Scale, and Source Credibility) did not meet our needs for self report formats, or operationalized constructs not central to our study. Because Norton's scale has been used with other populations, we decided to use this scale despite its low to moderate subscale internal reliabilities as reported in Rubin, Palmgreen and Sypher (1994). Likewise, validity of this instrument has been questioned.

We also desired a measure that would provide an index of a communicator's flexibility in using a variety of communication styles. Finding none in the literature, we used the following logic to construct such a index. The CSM response scale ranges from 0 to 4; with four items per variable, scores can range from 0 to 16 on each variable. We assumed that a score of 10 in any given style indicated that a respondent perceived she could successfully enact that style. We identified the number of CSM variables on which the respondent had a score of 10 or more, and added those scores. Finally, we multiplied that subtotal by the number of variables on which the respondent scored 10 or greater. This provided a relative index of variable strength and ability to use several variables. The following two examples demonstrate:

Example A:

dominant	dramatic	animated	impression-leaving	relaxed	attentive	open	friendly	precise	argumentative /contentious
12	13	13	9	5	10	11	10	6	7

12 + 13 + 13 + 10 + 11 + 10 = 69 x 6 = 414 = communicator style flexibility

Example B:

dominant	dramatic	animated	impression-leaving	relaxed	attentive	open	friendly	precise	argumentative /contentious
10	11	5	9	3	4	8	8	11	12

10 + 11 + 11 + 12 = 44 x 4 = 176 = communicator style flexibility

Results/Findings

At initial glance, the data appear within expected tolerances. The CSM variables achieved moderate internal reliabilities; the PRCA and CCS variables had greater internal integrity. Means for PRCA and CCS variables were similar to other reported uses of the scales. See Table 1 for pre-training scores and Table 2 for post-training scores. We considered performing ANOVAs to test for differences between programs and the comparison group. Limited participants in some cells diminished the ability of this procedure. Instead, we chose to display the PRCA and CCS data relative to its norms.

As reported in DeFleur, Kearney and Plax (1993), total PRCA scores equal to and greater than 80 designate high communication apprehension; scores equal to and less than 50 suggest low communication apprehension. Scores in between these two extremes are considered "normal." Table 3

displays these data for participants in each program and the comparison group. We also displayed other normative comparisons there. For example, it has been reported that 70% of those taking the public speaking portion of the PRCA report high communication apprehension in this context (DeFleur, Kearney, & Plax, 1993). The normative percentages and percentages for each population sampled are included in Table 3.

On the CCS, scores equal to or above 108 are considered to be competent communicators and "generally more sensitive, flexible, and assertive communicators" (cited in DeFleur, Kearney, & Plax, 1993, p. 351). While the normative percentage of the population which score at this level is not known, we note in Table 3 the percentage of each population sampled that score in this range.

Thus, in response to **Research Question 1,** do these communication competence and communication apprehension scores appear normal? Close inspection of Table 3 reveals that women in welfare-to-work programs are generous in their communication skill self-assessments. Only a few cells are close to the normative data. For example, it is expected that 10% of the general population experience high communication apprehension in dyadic situations. Only participants in WICS 2 reached or succeeded that proportion (10.0% pre-training; 16.7% post-training). In overall communication apprehension, it is expected that 20% of the general population will express high scores. WICS 2 reported scores within this range (20.0% pre-training; 50.0% post-training) as did WICS 4 (18.2% pre-training; 36.4% post-trainng). Of the participants who returned post-training questionnaires from the previous WICS classes, 25.0% reported high communication apprehension as did 27.3% of the Urban League participants.

In comparison to the college students, welfare-to-work program participants report communication apprehension scores at the high, moderate, and low levels at about the same proportion. In several, cases, there are more welfare-to-work participants at the moderate level and low levels than college students at the high and moderate levels. Thus, in response to research question 1, women participating in welfare-to-work programs do not report higher levels of communication apprehension or lower levels of communication competence as compared to other populations. However, what is unknown is to what extent participants' self-report assessments are representative of their communication behavior sets.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the communication competence and communication apprehension scores of all participants--welfare-to-work program participants and the comparison college student group--would improve significantly over the testing period. Competence should increase; apprehension should decrease. The communication apprehension subscales of public speaking apprehension, group apprehension, meeting apprehension and interpersonal apprehension were all positively and moderately correlated with one another (pre-training, .558 to .732; post-training .581 to .821) replicating the expected subscale interrelationships.

Tests of correlation determined that there is a significant negative and moderate correlation between communication competence and communication apprehension at both pre- (-.448, $p<.001$) and post-training (-.485, $p<.001$), with the negative correlation relationship being slightly, but not significantly more pronounced at post-training. Total Communication Apprehension mean at pre-training was 62.834 (s.d. 16.554) and 62.639 (s.d. 16.416) at post-training. Communication Competence mean at pre-training was 139.129 (s.d. 15.381) and 137.344 (s.d. 18.152) at post-training. Thus, few if any training effects were achieved allowing us to reject Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 predicted an increase in communicator style flexibility over the course of the training. Using repeated measures analysis, the ANOVA was significant ANOVA ($F=3.53$, $p=<.001$, df 9,231) for the prediction of communication style flexibility score by pre- or post-training and program. The overall model accounted for 12% of the variance with time of testing not contributing significantly to the model, program accounting for nearly 8% of the model, and the interaction accounting for 3% of the variance. Flexibility scores generally decreased at post-testing (pre-training mean = 431.83, s.d. 378.016, min/max 0/1350; post-training mean = 351.392, s.d. 360.477, min/max 0/1450). Note that flexibility scores varied widely by WICS class and that one WICS class reported higher flexibility scores than the comparison college students. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is rejected. Detailed extermination of the flexibility scores is shown below.

Program	Pre-Training Flexibility Score	Post-Training Flexibility Score	Direction of Change
WICS 1	327.000	215.933	decrease
WICS 2	273.300	413.333	increase
WICS 3	257.182	192.850	decrease
WICS 4	621.545	186.182	decrease
College Students	482.860	484.360	no change

Note that scores increase and decrease by program for welfare-to-work programs, but that communicator style flexibility scores remain relatively stable for the comparison college students. Because we were only able to collect post-training data from the other samples, these were not included in the repeated measures analysis. For comparison purposes, the data are displayed below:

Program	Post-Training Flexibility Score
WICS Memphis Mail	255.083
WICS Nashville Mail	260.263
Urban League	487.909
Fresh Start	458.818

Hypothesis 3 predicted that Communicator Style Flexibility is a function of the presence of competence and the absence of apprehension. The regression models testing for the prediction of communicator style flexibility from the total apprehension and communication competence scores were significant at pre-training and post-training. At pre-training, the model accounted for 27% of the variance ($F=27.80$, $p=<.001$, df 2,136) which both independent variables contributing significantly to the model in the expected directions. Communication Competence contributed 6% of the variance; Total Communication Apprehension contributed 9% of the variance. At post-training, the model accounted for 22% of the variance ($F=22.36$, $p=<.001$, df 2,151) with both independent variables contributing significantly to the model in the expected directions. Communication Competence contributed 4% of the variance; Total Communication Apprehension contributed 9% of the variance. While Hypothesis 3 is supported, the models differed insignificantly from pre-training to post-training. It appears that the

absence of communication apprehension contributes more significantly to Communicator Style Flexibility than Communication Competence.

Discussion

Interpretation of these confusing and null results are challenging; but we believe they do provide answers and point researchers and practitioners in some fruitful directions. While communication competence and communication apprehension were related in the expected way, this relationship varied little over the course of training--for any group of participants in the program. While communication skill training was not the primary issue of any program, facilitators of the welfare-to-work programs and the instructors of the communication courses *expected* that participants' communication skills would improve over the course of instruction. The importance of communication skills in the workplace has been demonstrated as Bovee and Thill (1992) who report that employees spend at least 30% of the business day in task-oriented oral communication.

The stimulus statement for the questionnaire asked respondents to think about their current communication behaviors. While many researchers have pointed out that self-reported perceptions of behavior do not necessarily match behavioral outcomes, these results reinforce the general instructional fallacy of expecting knowledge to somehow become transferred into behavioral patterns. Perhaps, more specific emphasis on communication skill training implemented into the welfare-to-work or job readiness programs could strengthen the inverse relationship between these two variables. To do so would seem important as research (Bednar, 1983; McGrath & Downs, 1990) has demonstrated that individuals who are perceived to have communication competence are perceived as more efficient managers. This is likely to also hold true for all levels of employees. Recently, Booth-Butterfield and Thomas (1995) found that office administration students in a four-year technical college reported more communication apprehension than college students in general. Although the office administration students had more work experience, their levels of apprehension were not affected. This is problematic given that office and clerical workers often must communicate with strangers in face-to-face and electronic modes and frequently represent their employing organizations to clients and customers. Although, as Booth-Butterfield and Thomas

suggest, office administration students may be attracted to this type of training due to the type of tasks involved, to accomplish their work they must communicate with others inside and outside the organization.

With respect to the high proportions of welfare-to-work participants reporting high communication competence and moderate to low communication apprehension, these self-reports are likely to be over generous assessments. Not wanting to admit one's deficiencies (even on paper) may be particularly troubling for a group of individuals who are already admitting by their participation in such programs that they require help to provide basic needs for themselves and their families. Interestingly, this level of communication competence and lack of communication apprehension was not observed when the research team visited the training sites to collect data. As part of the data collection agreement, research team members gave individual feedback reports to each Memphis WICS participants who participated in both pre-training and post-training evaluations. These feedback sessions were conducted in private, one-on-one settings. Even though the settings were intimate many participants spoke quietly, with their heads down or eyes lowered. Few spoke until spoken to. Participants were encouraged to ask questions; few did. These field experiences coupled with the findings suggest that facilitators need to pay attention to issues of communication competence versus self-perceptions of communication competence. These programs are self-help programs with the difficult objective of moving women from welfare to self-sufficient work situations. Not only must one perceive herself as possessing communication competence and without communication apprehension, one must demonstrate these skills to others. Recalling that Spitzberg (1983b) defines communication competence as knowledge, skill, and motivation, these women may have knowledge about what constitutes effective ways of communicating but are not motivated or are unable to perform these behaviors.

Rejection of **H2** is not as bothersome as it might appear. Since some flexibility scores increased, it implies that some welfare-to-work or work readiness programs are succeeding at increasing participants' awareness of the range of communication skills needed for the work environment. For the participants whose flexibility scores decreased, possibly some participants were over confident of their communication abilities because the test of styles and flexibility has been confined to their family or social environments. Once exposed to training and growth opportunities, perhaps participants recognize that their flexibility is

more limited than they realized. The increased social and professional contact with the facilitators and other participants may have made them less sure of their abilities. Certainly, change is difficult to accomplish within the limited timeframes and crowded curriculum of these programs.

The stability in the flexibility scores of the college students helps to validate this interpretation. The population from which these students were drawn can be described as representing non-traditional age students; most of whom students work at least part time. Stable flexibility scores in this group may imply that more work experiences give these participants better parameters for evaluating their style abilities. Still, the overall objective with respect to Communicator Style Flexibility would be to the increase the flexibility score over time. Norton states that increased flexibility will lead to new experiences, that in turn, allows for self-renewal (Norton & Brenders, 1996).

Finally, flexibility was predicted by, first, the absence of communication apprehension, and second, the presence of communication competence. This suggests that our conceptualization and operationalization of the CSM measure into the Communication Style Flexibility variable warrants further attention. Harville (1992) found a significant and negative relationship between job level and communication requirements. "Higher levels jobs had significantly lower communication requirements than lower level jobs" (p. 160). Such a finding emphasizes why welfare-to-work programs should consider several aspects of communication skill training as one of their core components. Promotional literature for WICS states that its main objective is to assist women in overcoming their fear of entering the job market by providing pre-employment training, building self-esteem, and increasing confidence and motivation levels. It would seem that increasing one's communication competence, and communicator style flexibility while decreasing one's communication apprehension would be a means to that end.

Limitations

An obvious limitation is the study's reliance on self-report measures. However, we believe that acknowledging individuals' perceptions are important when training objectives seek change in behavior. Knowledge of one's self-reported score coupled with inability or difficulty in role plays can be a powerful motivator to reassess one's skill and try out new behaviors. Work readiness programs like WICS and others are the last safe or risk-free environment these women will inhabit before entering the workforce.

Trying out new interpersonal communication skills in training sessions where guidance is available is preferable to attempting new skills for the first time in the workplace. We believe that work readiness programs such as the ones examined here would better serve the targeted populations by having communication be a central and explicit component of their curriculum.

Another limitation, and one more particular to applied than interpersonal communication research, is the difficulty in tracking participants which in this case resulted in a low number of respondents. This is the reality of these particular communication contexts, however . . . one, we believe that researchers in all contextual areas must consider. Adaptation of research techniques and designs will help researchers serve overlooked populations that can benefit from study.

Future Research

Obviously, additional examination of CSM and its flexibility adaptation is required. But the pilot results reported here are encouraging. Second, we need a better evaluation of which communication skills make someone employable. What are "employment ready" communication skills? And, how can training programs most effectively and efficiently provide this type of communication skills training? Looking beyond our normal populations for research participants forces us to re-think our assumptions and re-frame communication applications. These data suggest that both are necessary.

Notes

[1]Although the JOBS programs have been replaced by Family First programs, the training issues remain the same.

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Table 1
Pre-Training Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability
Friendly	10.864	2.515	.605
Impression-Leaving	10.496	2.791	.803
Relaxed	10.209	2.524	.578
Argumentative/Contentious	9.072	3.436	.696
Attentive	10.705	2.379	.616
Precise	9.705	2.430	.362
Animated	9.986	3.095	.669
Dramatic	8.374	3.391	.729
Openness	8.856	2.837	.579
Dominant	8.087	3.293	.762
Group Apprehension	14.674	4.678	.838
Meeting Apprehension	16.000	4.703	.826
Dyadic Apprehension	14.511	4.596	.805
Public Apprehension	17.655	4.913	.792
Total Apprehension	62.734	16.555	
Communication Competence	139.129	15.381	.921

n=135

Table 2
Post-Training Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Reliability
Friendly	10.864	2.939	.671
Impression-Leaving	10.393	3.345	.859
Relaxed	10.707	2.917	.677
Argumentative/Contentious	8.439	3.442	.736
Attentive	10.845	2.690	.597
Precise	9.309	2.647	.541
Animated	8.929	2.675	.542
Dramatic	7.393	3.105	.615
Openness	8.670	2.819	.573
Dominant	7.721	3.176	.749
Group Apprehension	14.793	4.555	.834
Meeting Apprehension	16.096	4.979	.833
Dyadic Apprehension	14.458	4.820	.769
Public Apprehension	17.655	4.913	.783
Total Apprehension	62.639	16.419	
Communication Competence	137.344	18.152	.936

n=155

Table 3
Normative Comparisons of PRCA and CCS Data at Pre/Post Training

Variable	Normative Data	College Students 86/50	WICS 1– Memphis 10/15	WICS 2 Memphis 10/6	WICS 3 Memphis 22/20	WICS 4 Memphis 11/11	WICS Mail Memphis /12	Fresh Start /11	Urban League /11	WICS– Nashville Mail /19
High Total	20.0%	14.0%	10.0%	20.0%	9.1%	18.2%				
CA		6.0%	13.3%	50.0%		36.4%	25.0%		27.3%	15.8%
Mod Total		60.5%	80.0%	30.0%	72.7%	36.4%				
CA		68.0%	60.0%	33.3%	90.0%	54.5%	58.3%	54.5%	45.5%	63.2%
Low Total		25.6%	10.0%	50.0%	18.2%	45.5%				
CA		26.0%	26.7%	16.7%	10.0%	9.1%	16.7%	45.5%	27.3%	21.1%
High Group	25.0%	5.8%			4.5%					
CA		4.0%				18.2%			9.1%	
Mod Group		57.0%	70%	60.0%	68.2%	27.3%	50.05			
CA		52.0%	60.0%	66.7%	80.0%	63.6%		45.5%	45.5%	68.4%
Low Group		37.2%	30%	40.0%	27.3%	72.7%	50.0%			
CA		44.0%	40.0%	33.3%	20.0%	18.2%		54.5%	45.5%	31.6%
High Meet	50.0%	5.8%	10.0%	10.0%	4.5%					
CA		8.0%	6.7%	16.7%	5.0%	18.2%	25.0%		9.1%	5.3%
Mod Meet		58.1%	80%	83.3%	81.8%	63.6%				
CA		56.0%	66.7%		80.0%	45.5%	66.7%	45.5%	72.7%	78.9%
Low Meet		31.4%	10%	10.0%	13.6%	36.4%				
CA		36.0%	26.7%		15.0%	36.4%	8.3%	54.5%	9.1%	15.8%
High Dyad	10.0%	2.3%		20.0%						
CA				16.7%		9.1%			9.1%	
Mod Dyad		58.1%	90%	50.0%	81.8%	36.4%				
CA		64.0%	60.0%	50.0%	85.0%	63.6%	66.7%	36.4%	54.5%	57.9%
Low Dyad		39.5%	10.0%	20.0%	18.2%	63.6%	33.3%			
CA		36.0%	40.0%	33.3%	15.0%	27.3%		63.6%	36.4%	42.1%
High PS CA	70.0%	12.8%		60.0%	9.1%	9.1%				
		8.0%		16.7%		9.1%	16.7%		27.3%	15.8%
Mod PS CA		72.1%	90%	30.0%	81.8%	72.7%				
		74.0%	93.3%	66.6%	95.0%	81.8%	66.7%	54.5%	54.5%	63.2%
Low PS CA		15.1%	10%	10.0%	9.1%	18.2%				
		8.0%	6.7%	16.7%	5.0%	9.1%	16.7%	45.5%	18.2%	21.1%
High CCS		96.5%	100%	100%	100%	90.9%				
		94.0%	93.3%	100%	90.0%	100%	100%	72.7%	100%	100%
Low CCS		3.5%				9.1%				
		6.0%	6.7%		10.0%			27.3%		

pre-training scores are on first row
post-training scores are on second row